Eating Dingoes

Fiona Probyn-Rapsey

School of Humanities and Inquiry, University of Wollongong

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Imagine if every plate of lamb or sheep meat came with a side dish of dingo. Admittedly, it's a rather grim image for a non-meat eater to contemplate. But, as I explain here, the eating of sheep also brings with it the incorporation of dingoes, not necessarily 'good to eat' but sacrificed in the name of those deemed 'good to eat' who are. This raises the question of what we mean when we say that something or someone is 'good to eat?'

According to Jacques Derrida, 'eating well' is not just about consumption or ingestion through the mouth and stomach, but it's also about ethics and moral tastes that we incorporate by living with and in specific cultures, and that we can decide upon by questioning the conventions we live in/with and through. He suggests that 'eating well' also describes what happens when we imbibe cultural ideas; we incorporate, assimilate and feed off culture, and because we have to 'eat', that is, we have to incorporate cultural ideas, we have to work out how to eat 'well' (Derrida 1991). Following Derrida, eating well also implicitly involves not being taken in by, or taking in, the 'bad' portions of what culture feeds us.

But eating well also raises the question of who is edible and who is not – again, these questions come down to cultural ideas that predict the *form of the meal* even before it is served. For example, in Australia it is forbidden to eat dingoes, but the eating of sheep is encouraged to the point of being seen as a patriotic, indeed manly, duty[1]. If it is un-Australian to not eat sheep then it is 'un-Australian' to eat any sort of dog. These are taboos and rituals specific to settler colonial culture; economies, exports and identities. Their practice is not necessarily any more ethical ('good to eat') than rituals in other countries that might, for instance, hold the reverse to be true: that dogs are for eating, but sheep are not. Australia does not have a dominant tradition of dog eating, but if we think about eating as something more than ingestion of other animal bodies and, as Derrida suggests, as something more like the swallowing up of cultural ideas, then we could argue, as I want to here, that we do indeed eat dogs as a matter of routine, and indeed as an integral part of the 'animal industrial complex' (Noske 1997) in which we live. This brings me to dingoes as a side dish; an invisible accompaniment to that ever-so-aussie plate of dead sheep. Here in Australia we have two different but interrelated ways of eating animals. One is to farm them directly for their flesh (those designated 'livestock'), and the other is to make all the other animals on the peripheries subject to this anthropocentric want. In this way meat eaters consume animal bodies directly, but also indirectly; and alongside this consumption of animal bodies (indirect and direct) are the consumption of cultural ideas about what and who is good to eat and who or what is not. Around this dominant norm of sheep edibility, Australian settler colonialism has built not only material ecologies (landscapes indelibly shaped by hoof, by plough[2] and by fences in the annexation of indigenous country), but also cultural myths that shape identities (the shearer, the drover, the pastoralist/shepherd, the bushman, the settler/farmer[3]) all born out of the control of animal life and death, and the task of determining who gets to eat who, and how. Thus the question of 'good eating' raises questions about how 'we' determine that one way of eating is somehow better than another, and how these determinations may in fact obscure the violence that underlies our relationships with *both* sheep and dingoes (but not only those two).

Before I go on to discuss the National Wild Dog Action Plan[4] (which I see as a recipe book for the eating/eradication of dingoes, based on the premise that sheep are 'good' to eat/assimilate), I will explain why I am interested in the relationship between sheep and dingoes. My broader project concerns dingoes and in particular the cultural politics of eradication; that is, what ideas have to be in place in order for a group of animals to be rendered eradicable. In the case of the dingo, I have been looking at how the designation 'wild dog' does much of this work of eradicating the dingo in advance. By constructing a mythical 'pure' specimen, the landscape is suddenly littered with mongrels, hybrids, menaces, wild dogs, who have lost their claim on protection and conservation of the 'pure' by muddying, staining their ancestral inheritance. I have made the point that the mobilisation of hybridity as akin to extinction is taxonomically related to miscegenation discourses that permeated and still circulate in settler colonial Australia (Probyn-Rapsey 2015).

The investment that the sheep industry has in this view of dingoes as a polluted population is evident in the National Wild Dog Action Plan (WoolProducers Australia 2014), a document that announces another round of wild dog eradication in a time of decline for the sheep industry. Although the plan includes dingoes in its definition of wild dog, it reflects the paradox of an apparently suicidal species, where it holds that dingo populations are threatening *themselves*, endangering *themselves,* through their own sexual selection with wild dogs. Such an argument implies that killing wild dogs is actually doing dingoes a favour, even if dingoes are also included in that very definition of wild dogs to begin with. They have swallowed up dingoes definitionally, and then claim to be able to spit them back out as pure specimens. As well as this investment in the science of dingo purity, I have also been struck by the enormous policy power that the sheep industry has in relation to dingo life, such that it is not possible to even think of the dingo, without also thinking about sheep at the same time. The meanings and the cultural life of these two groups of animals are so thoroughly interwoven in our contemporary cultural landscape that it's impossible to separate them. Indeed, I think *mixing* them up is what is actually needed in order to think about dingoes more clearly. In saying 'let's mix the dingoes with the sheep in order to understand them', it might make it sound like I am advocating conflict, but actually, I want to bring them together because they are brought together already by their situation in relation to the industrialisation of animals as commodities in general, or within what Barbara Noske calls the 'animal industrial complex' (1997), a concept that describes the mixture or enmeshment of animal life with capital, culture and forms of governance, tying animals to categories such as 'livestock' in which they 'live' (and die) merely as commodities.

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[1] As seen in Meat Livestock Australia (MLA) advertising, Stan Kekovich's 'Lambassador' series, as well as the more recent "Operation Boomerang"

[2] Vicki Grieves points out that the 'plough became a weapon in the war against nature and Indigenous custodians'.

[3] Deb Verhoeven argues that 'Sheep recur en masse in Australian films, and usually their appearance signals a narrative enquiry into the production of identity' (Verhoeven, 2006, 9).

[4] National Wild Dog Action Plan: Promoting and supporting community-driven action for landscape-scale wild dog management, WoolProducers Australia 2014. For a full list of authors and contributors see Acknowledgment section in the opening pages of the Plan. http://www.pestsmart.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/NWDAP_FINAL_MAY14.pdf

The National Wild Dog Action Plan (NWDAP) is a good example of what Noske has in mind here. The Plan shows that pastoralists are policy players on a scale both small and large, with links though Meat Livestock Australia, WoolProducers, government agencies, and federal political parties including the Liberal and National Party. Pastoralists and their representative bodies are across global economies, national economies, research infrastructure and funding, Landcare, animal science and welfare, the promotion of meat eating and wool wearing, and they are also actively engaged with the 'conservation' of the dingo, as well as their eradication. The NWDAP is produced by WoolProducers Australia, and backed by government funds, and is not only about the sheep industry protecting sheep from dingo attack, it is also, as the metaphor of 'bite back' (NWDAP, 23) jokingly suggests, *a recipe book for eating dingoes*, for incorporating their lives into the animal industrial complex that situates animals instrumentally, as mere objects for human use and exploitation. It designates human control of animal life and death as non-negotiable and precedes from the basis that animal life is valued as a commodity for human use. This is not a strong foundation for animal ethics, for 'eating well'. It decides, in advance, that dingoes will die alongside the demand that sheep be 'eaten well' by humans (and not by any others).

Once dingoes are caught in the same trap as sheep as industrial animals, they too are edible, appropriated, subject to a logic of instrumentalisation. And yet, we seem accustomed to seeing dingoes, to valuing dingoes, only in as much as they are able to stay somehow outside of this category of livestock, in the 'wild', a space that is impossible given the reach of industry, and which industry marks for us as its romantic 'elsewhere', reflecting a mixed up repertoire of feelings regarding animals. The NWDAP is an example of a vested interest in separating the issues of wild and industrialized animals, because animal edibility depends on our 'mixed feelings' for animals according to type; the named and individualised 'pets' we don't eat, the livestock we number, the wild ones we estimate. Our mixed feelings for these animals means dividing our attention and our care between species. I think it's safe to say that, in general, there is a greater institutional and cultural concern for species extinctions than for species 'massification'[5]; those like chickens, sheep and cattle who are being forcibly reproduced in industrialized farming situations. And yet, the *mix* of these two animal spheres, founded partly on their shared geographies, needs to be better understood. Engagements with the rare and endangered should bring us to the question of the massified and factory farmed, so that, in the case of the dingoes, it is not a case of being 'for dingoes' and 'against sheep' in Australia, but rather of understanding how the exploitation of both is managed by a highly charged, anthropocentric relationship to animal bodies that is premised on their incorporation in one form or another.

This partly explains the attention given to the dingo/wild dog by the sheep industry. The document expresses concern about the impact of wild dog attacks primarily in relation to its impact on humans. When wild dog meets sheep, it seems that it is the pastoralist/shepherd whose suffering counts most of all. I'm not saying that the sheep farmer does not suffer when 'wild dogs' attack their flock, their distress is palpable and manifest.[6] But this suffering is one of many, including those of the sheep and the dingoes that prey upon them. As Christine Townend argued back in 1985, Australian sheep husbandry methods are far from ideal. The sheer size of sheep properties in Australia and the number of sheep being farmed means that for much of the year, sheep are left unmonitored by human managers. Townend argues that "given the economic constraints of contemporary capitalist society, a humane wool industry is virtually impossible in this country" (Townend 1985, p18). She shows that patterns of cruelty and neglect such as tail docking, castration, mulesing (all without anaesthetic), unsupervised lambing, lack of shelter, untreated disease, exposure to drought and freezing conditions, lengthy transportation to slaughter (including live export) are acceptable norms in the industry. She argues that these conditions are not so much the fault of "every individual wool grower" as much as "lack of economic viability on the farm and labour costs" (p23). A more recent report from the Sheep Co-operative Research Centre suggests that little has changed. *Sheep - Simple Guide: making more money with less work* (Hall 2013) describes sheep as "generally a non-depreciating asset" (p2) that can be managed with as few "labour units" as possible: "10,000 to 15,000 DSE [dry sheep equivalent] per labour unit is possible and efficient" (p14). How such a ratio can meet animal welfare standards is not explained.

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[5] I use the term 'massification' to describe the deliberate mass breeding of animals designated livestock

[6] Helen Cathles writes: "I cannot stress enough that farmers and graziers are very conscious of their duty of care to their animals. As much as the economic rationalists might tell us otherwise, that our sheep, our cattle and our goats, are only commodities, our duty of care seems to override this." (75) The duty of care does not override the commodity status of the animals raised for slaughter, rather it forms an integral part of animal welfare-based killing.

Mulesing was meant to be phased out by 2014,[7] in recognition of the impact of the boycott of Australian wool organised by a PETA campaign. Australian wool growers have withdrawn from this agreement, and it seems that our attention has been turned to wild dogs instead. The timing of this shift in focus is significant and it sends an interesting and possibly unintended message that we should not be looking at the violence of animal farming, but instead we should direct our concern towards the violence that wild dogs inflict upon the sheep and their farmers. It is as if the Plan indicates: *it is not our eating of sheep that is the problem, but their eating of sheep that is the problem*. What follows is a purifying logic that makes farming a 'good' way of eating and predation a 'bad' way. We are being reminded by the animal industrial complex that feeds and leads Australia that farming is not predation, but protection. The shepherd is not the killer of sheep; after all, that occurs off the farm, out of sight in the slaughterhouse. But the shepherd's protection of his/her flock is always already tied up with the logic of protection and the biopolitical management of 'life' and in the case of *livestock* (not what Foucault had in mind when he wrote about pastoral power, 1997/1982), the realities of making live now in order to sacrifice later are manifested very differently; the shepherd's care over the flock ends with the abattoir. The pastoral logic of the sheep farm (where care is also one of power's forms) is embedded in the deeply contradictory logic of protection, as Wendy Brown has argued: "to be 'protected' by the very same power whose violation one fears perpetuates the very modality of dependence and powerlessness" (1995, 170). That is the case for sheep, and it is also the case for dingoes, in whose name the logic of 'protection' is also mobilised.

Because of this logic of protection, because of 'sheep country', the lives of sheep and dingoes are mixed up with each other, and yet they are often placed on opposing ends of political interests, as if their lives and interests are separable, fenced off from each other. Consider Barnaby Joyce, who as Minister for Agriculture launched the National Wild Dog Action Plan, and in doing so took up a familiar position of shepherd. Joyce's 'flock' is both the sheep farmers he is addressing and the Australian electorate that he must 'look after' as his governmental/pastoral duty (Foucault 1982/1997). Moreover, Australians routinely refer to the land as 'sheep country', which tacitly ordains a nation of shepherds, the romance seemingly immune to the realities of economic decline or environmental destruction. But the phrase 'sheep country' designates not only an industry, but an image of benign settlement by animal proxy. The war that colonialism represents has always involved sheep, as both mechanisms of ecological dispossession but also as an image of self-replicating multitudes of white bodies occupying the land, "central vectors of Australia's colonization" as Sarah Franklin (2007, 122) has pointed out. The dingo threatens this pastoral occupation by predation, and yet, in a strange twist, the dingo actually helps make the occupation appear as a legitimate form of protection. Without the dingo, we cannot have the shepherd – the protector and carer of sheep. The dingo becomes scapegoat, not only for the violence of occupation, and the violence of animal farming, but also for the belief that there is a legitimate way to eat sheep, and an illegitimate way to eat them. If sheep are implicated in or mixed up in settler colonial narratives, they are also, relatedly mixed up in the persecution of the dingo who functions not only as a scapegoat for industrial decline, but also as a means of re-presenting the sheep industry and the sheep farmer as a 'protector' of animals, rather than an exploiter. Furthermore, what happens when the shepherd is in charge of protecting the 'wolf' would seem predictable. The dingo is made edible, swallowed up by an industrial relation to animal bodies that fails to satisfactorily distinguish good eating (farming) from bad (predation) because of the violence that is intrinsic to both. We 'eat' dingoes in Australia because we do not 'eat well' when it comes to animal life in general.

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[7] See Sneddon and Rollin on what risks the industry faces by not phasing out mulesing.

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